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Canada

March 21, 1969

Dear Sir:

We are enclosing a statement on the recent events at Sir George Williams University. This statement is being distributed by the undersigned as individuals, not as representatives of their organizations, in response to wide-spread attacks on the University. Further information and interviews may be obtained by contacting Professor Albert Jordan, Department of French (SGWU) or Mr. Allan Hilton, SGWU Students' Association (AC 514, 879-4518).

Yours truly,

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Albert Jordan, Secretary
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Sir George Williams University has been denounced as a racist university. Other critics have accused the University of insensitivity towards black students, ineptitude in communication between administration and students, and laxity and delay in establishing procedures to handle the accusation of racial discrimination on the part of a faculty member. It has been stated that this constituted the "provocation" that led to the massive disruption and destruction inflicted on the University on February 11. Many of these accusations have been uncritically reported by the mass media and have achieved wide circulation. The purpose of this statement is to review the events at Sir George Williams and correct a number of false impressions which do a great injustice to the University.

It is often alleged that the University initially failed to respond to the complaints of seven students and ignored their grievances for a period of approximately eight months, thus generating a sense of bitterness and frustration. The simple truth is that the students' accusation of racial discrimination was reviewed by the Dean of Science within one week of its presentation and that the Dean of Science found the accused instructor innocent of the charge. The accusation was first stated to the Dean on April 29, 1968 and the Dean conducted his inquiry on May 5, 1968. The two main charges at the inquiry were that a Biology instructor, Perry Anderson, never gave a grade higher than "C" to students from the West Indies and that he called students from the

West Indies "Mr.", while addressing all white students in his class by their first names. These charges were readily disproven and the Dean of Science (who conducted the inquiry in the presence of the complainants and Mr. Anderson) concluded that there was absolutely no evidence to prove any of the charges of racial discrimination. The Dean asserts that at the inquiry he made the complaining students aware of his judgment that the charge of racial discrimination, as presented by them, was without foundation and that, therefore, the matter had come to a close. Under these conditions, the Dean did not think it necessary to send formal notification of his decision to the complainants.

In the fall of 1968, the Dean of Students and a few faculty members became aware that the complaining students were not satisfied with the decision of the Dean of Science. In late November, the Dean of Students began working to assemble a meeting of the complainants and high administrative officers of the University, to whom the complainants had not yet made an appeal. On December 5, before a meeting could be arranged, a group of students appeared in the office of the Principal of the University, Dr. Robert C. Rae, and informed him of their unilateral decision that Assistant Professor Perry Anderson was no longer to be considered a member of the faculty. They demanded that the Principal inform Professor Anderson of this fact at the earliest opportunity.

Under no circumstances could the Principal summarily dismiss a member of the faculty only because a handful of students so wished and

without proof or an evaluation of evidence through due process. Yet the Principal took the accusation of racial discrimination very seriously. Two hours after the students had presented their demand, Principal Rae reported his concern to the Council of the Sir George Williams Association of University Teachers, consisting of 25 elected faculty members. In the meantime, the students took over the Biology Department's office and declared that they would refuse to leave until the Principal had confirmed the firing of Professor Anderson.

While Professor Anderson had been accused and exonerated the previous May, neither this fact nor the students' renewal of the old charges against him were known among more than a handful of faculty members. Principal Rae had been on a study leave in France the previous May and was also not familiar with the tenuousness and fragility of the evidence that had been presented by the students while he was away. In most universities, the conclusion of a Dean's investigation would have remained unquestioned by the faculty and administrators. But Sir George is not like most universities. The complainants' apparently sincere belief that they had been discriminated against and the Dean's failure to send the complainants a letter formally notifying them that he had cleared Professor Anderson seemed justification enough, in the Sir George environment, for the convening of another committee to hear the students' evidence. Late on the afternoon of December 5, Vice-Principal D.B. Clarke, the complainants, and Professor Anderson agreed on a hearing committee consisting of five faculty members,

each of whom was known for his vigorous opposition to all forms of racial discrimination. The complainants then agreed to end their occupation of the Biology office, lending weight to the belief, widely shared at Sir George, in non-authoritarian solutions to University conflicts.

The Vice-Principal (Academic) and faculty members had assumed on December 5 that the hearing committee would commence work immediately. But the committee could not begin its work without being presented with a specific set of written charges by the students. Despite this need, from December 5 to January 10 the complainants refused to submit any specific charge in written form, let alone any evidence to substantiate charges. Thus the students were responsible for a delay of many weeks, in spite of their repeated complaints later that the University was dragging its feet and was insensitive to their grievances.

The issue that ostensibly galvanized student protest was the charge that the committee set up by the University to investigate the accusations underwent changes in its members without consultation with the complainants. It is because of these appointments that some feel the complaining students were denied their rights and that this constituted the "provocation" that forced the students to respond with massive violence.

The fact is that a remarkable series of contradictions obscured the real story about the legitimacy of the hearing committee charged with

the task of investigating the students accusations of racism. Briefly, the relevant facts are as follows: (a) the hearing committee (originally composed of two black professors, two white professors, and one professor from India) was selected on December 5 in consultation with the complaining students, and was approved by them; (b) the committee, in both its original and revised form was composed of individuals determined to eradicate any form of racial discrimination -- if only some significant evidence was presented; (c) the resignation of the two black professors from the hearing committee was demanded by the complaining students themselves; (d) one reason why the complainants fought with the two black professors on the committee was because the two professors supported Professor Anderson's basic right to have a lawyer represent him. The Acting Principal had agreed to allocate funds to pay the lawyers' fees for all parties in the dispute and, during the entire affair, the students had at least three lawyers -- all of whom quit or were dismissed by them; (e) on January 20, 1969, the students announced that they themselves had unilaterally appointed two replacements for the two black professors on the committee. This was three days before the two professors had resigned. The replacements were to be two students at the University. This constituted two unilateral violations of the agreement of December 5 on the part of the students. First of all, the agreement that Anderson be judged by his peers (i.e. not by students). Secondly, that all parties (Anderson and the students) must be consulted about the composition of the committee. The students explicitly defined their actions and demands as "non-negotiable" and from January 20th to the start of the

hearings on January 26th, refused to consult Professor Anderson regarding their "appointees" to the committee.

Certain other items are also relevant: (a) the Acting Principal finally appointed two replacements to the committee without securing the approval of the complainants (or Professor Anderson). This followed the students' two unilateral violations against a committee which they had helped to select and had accepted in the first place. Since these violations were defined by the students as "non-negotiable" and it was imperative for the University that the truth be determined, the responsible administrative officers and the members of the hearing committee had no option but to name the replacements themselves;

(b) it was imperative that the committee begin its hearing out of simple justice to Professor Anderson, the accused. There were two parties to the dispute, not just the students, and D.B. Clarke, who became Acting Principal on December 12, was obligated to be just to both. The students had first agreed to the composition of the hearing committee and had then unilaterally rejected it. Professor Anderson had also agreed to the hearings, assuming they would speedily commence, and it was not his fault that the students had changed their minds. While the students engaged in tactics certain to delay the start of hearings, Anderson's reputation was being seriously and publicly damaged through stories in the mass media, even though no evidence against him had been presented. The administrative officers of the University and the hearing committee had a real obligation to proceed

as quickly as possible with the hearing to determine the truth and give Anderson a chance to defend himself. The students' "non-negotiable" demands made it seem most unlikely that a new committee acceptable to both sides could readily be negotiated.

By January 23, it had become apparent that the complainants were attempting to disrupt the existing hearing committee. If the administrative officers of the University had granted the complainants a veto over the start of the hearings, they would have become accomplices in denying Professor Anderson his right to a speedy hearing in which he could confront the accusation against him within the boundaries of formal rules of evidence. Under his authority as Acting Principal, D.B. Clarke appointed two faculty members to replace the two who had resigned. These men, too, were strongly opposed to racial discrimination. On January 26, the complainants walked out of the first hearing even though the Acting Principal had guaranteed them the right to appeal the composition of the hearing committee to an appeal body consisting of distinguished Canadians from outside the University. If any persons have ever decided, for whatever reason, to discredit a professor and to create a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the necessity of substantiating their accusations could simultaneously be presented as a violation of their rights, a better scenario could not be written.

A few words must also be said about the atmosphere of intimidation that existed at Sir George Williams University in these and following

weeks. Despite the fact that the complainants and their supporters were freely granted university facilities (lecture theaters, microphones, etc.) to express their viewpoint to the student body, these same students repeatedly disrupted occasions on which individuals attempted to express the viewpoint of the hearing committee or the Acting Principal to the student body. On one occasion, the Acting Principal was shouted down and prevented from reading a statement explaining his viewpoint, despite the fact that he had come to speak at the invitation of the same complaining students who prevented him from speaking. In general, a number of the complaining students and their supporters did their best to prevent persons from being heard who might attempt to justify the legitimacy of the hearing committee. They labelled anyone who disagreed with them as "racists" and "liars".

On January 22, ten students, including some of the complainants, entered the office of Dr. John O'Brien, the new Vice-Principal (Academic) and are alleged to have detained him against his will for two hours. They are also alleged to have refused to let him leave his office until he signed a letter apologizing for a previous letter asking Professor Anderson to continue remaining away from his classes, which the students felt unjustly suggested they were capable of violence. The events in the Vice-Principal's office have led to criminal charges against the students involved.

It is by now well-known that the occupation of the University's

computer centre followed these events and that on February 11 the occupying students destroyed large quantities of research data belonging to students and faculty members and obliterated the computer centre. Among the falsehoods that have been propagated concerning the acts of destruction and violence is the story that the Acting Principal had made a deal capitulating to the students' demands for the dissolution of the existing hearing committee, but that the faculty association compelled him to retreat from this agreement. This false charge has been used to justify the students' decision to flood with fire hoses several upper floors of the University's new Hall Building and erect barricades to prevent classes from being held, acts of destruction and disruption which finally provoked an administrative officer to call in the Montreal police. When police arrived, some students barricaded themselves inside the computer centre, where they began the systematic destruction of research data, university records, and computer master tapes.

No administrative officer or representative of the University had made a deal to dissolve the hearing committee. The Acting Principal and the Vice-Principal (Academic), strongly supported by the faculty association Council, had committed themselves to negotiations with the occupiers in their search for a reasonable and principled solution to the problem. The Acting Principal's willingness to support negotiations was cynically twisted by a few members of the occupation into a non-existent pledge that the complainants' proposals would be approved. Victory celebrations were planned and a

crew was assigned to clean up the occupied areas. Further misrepresentations were directed at the faculty and administrative officers. They were led to believe by spokesmen for the occupiers that the students' proposals were negotiable and open to further discussion. Under this impression, the executive committee of the faculty association consulted with an expert on the formation of arbitration committees and the faculty association council submitted several proposals to the Vice-Principal (Academic) for possible consideration in further negotiations with the occupiers. The misrepresentations reached their logical culmination towards midnight on February 10. The complainants' lawyer informed his clients by telephone that the University lawyer wanted to talk with him the next day to continue negotiations and that the faculty association had presented to the Vice-Principal its views on a practical method for selecting a committee to hear any appeals from the composition and findings of the existing hearing committee. The complainant who answered the phone declared to his lawyer that the occupiers would escalate the conflict. This was the last straw for the complainants' lawyer, who had earlier drafted his letter of resignation because his clients threatened possible violence if their demands were not met. He resigned as the complainants' lawyer.

Soon afterwards, several members of the occupation declared to their compatriots that the administration had rejected the students'

proposals and betrayed its pledge. The occupiers, whose hopes had been falsely buoyed up earlier, reacted predictably. The least responsible individuals among them set out on the path of destruction which culminated in the fires of the computer centre. The responsibility for the disaster of February 11 rests in the hands of those occupiers who gave their compatriots false expectations of imminent victory and lied to them in labeling the Vice-Principal's request for further negotiations as a betrayal.

The thesis that the destruction of research materials and the computer centre was precipitated by ill will on the part of faculty or administrative officers should be seen for what it really is--a smokescreen. Indeed, what really happened is that some occupiers initiated a second self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the calling of the police would serve as the excuse for the destruction of the computer centre and that these persons acted in a way which guaranteed that the police would have to be called.

In view of the above facts, it seems incredible that in the eyes of some, Sir George Williams University has been characterized as "racist" or insensitive to the legitimate complaints of students, black or white. Indeed, we believe that a more accurate characterization would be of a university making every effort to insure that the legitimate grievances of all students received full and sympathetic attention. It has been particularly discouraging that the mass media have too often uncritically accepted the most sensational and

superficial versions of events, when the slightest checking would have revealed the truth. Such stereotyped reports do not advance the cause of human rights.